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ABSTRACT

Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of language games, although largely undeveloped, can provide the basis for a useful analogy between the composition process and the playing of a game. Teachers can motivate students to write by presenting the composition process as a language game. The following points should prove helpful in accomplishing this end: no game is as much fun when it is first being learned as it is after it has been mastered; people know whether they have lost in any game; in the early stages of a game, people are allowed to profit from mistakes; and all games have rules which are meant to be followed. Teachers of freshman composition should concern themselves with matters of clarity, organization, and meaning and not with those basic "rules of the game" whose mastery is only a matter of practice. (KS)

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Wittgenstein's Theory of Language Games and the Freshman Composition Class

J.F. Kobler

Because I had as a teacher of composition made a regular, but not systematic, practice of encouraging students to practice writing with the same spirit they might give skate boarding or pool shots, I viewed with interest and hope occasional references to Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of language games. My self-promisory notes to read Wittgenstein finally came due about a year ago. Frankly, I'm disappointed in Wittgenstein overall as a philosopher, more because of his imcomplete, helter-skelter approach to all ideas than because of the ideas themselves. Likewise, I was disappointed to find out how largely undeveloped by Wittgenstein himself was this theory of langauge games. While I'm listing disappointments, let me add that which comes from the knowledge of how few students are willing to work hard enough at anything, any game, any kind of learning to become good at it. I don't mean professionally good, but just competent and knowledgeable to the uttermost limits of their native talents.

But back to my disappointment in Wittgenstein on language games. Apparently every specific use of language is a language game, as this portion of his longer list in Philosophical Investigations (23) should indicate to you:

"Giving orders, and obeying them--

Describing the appearance of an object. . .

Reporting an event--

Speculating about an event--

Making up a story; and reading it--

Singing catches--

Translating from one langauge into another--

Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying."

If these are all language games, what uses of langauage cannot be called games? Wittgenstein does not list any specific none-game uses of language. One thing he does say is this: "Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (PI, 23).

Wittgenstein may be so devoted in the initial sections of Philosophical Investigations to refuting Augustine's belief that the naming of objects is the only essential language game in town, and that names of objects are as fixed, as God-given, as are the objects themselves, that he neglects to defend and explain his own term "language-games." However, we must not think that Wittgenstein is claiming that your and my total uses of English are no more than a collection of discrete language games. In fact, in the Blue and Brown Books (p. 81) he says explicitly, "The picture we have of the language of the grown up is that of a nebulous mass of language, his mother tongue, surrounded by discrete and more or less clear cut language games, the technical languages." Such technical languages include descriptive geometry, chemical symbols, maybe even logic as practiced by philosophers. Is poetry a discrete

language game? Might even the 500-word in-class theme represent a language-game? One of Wittgenstein's more severe critics (James Bogen in Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language, [p. 204]) asserts that "Outside these abnormally well determined uses of language the analogy between words and pieces whose roles are clearly fixed by the practices and rules of a game becomes far-fetched and misleading." I hope to show here that no matter how ill-defined Wittgenstein's theory of language games may be, no matter how ill-chosen his most constant game example (chess) may be, that the basic analogy between writing in a language (or learning to write in a language) and playing a game is neither far-fetched nor misleading, In fact, I consider the analogy highly instructive.

In setting it forth, I lay most of the stress upon motivation; the idea of language games may best be used to motivate students to better written performances. Surely, motivating students to want to write better is our single most difficult task. My remarks today are designed to motivate you to motivate unwilling students to want to try to learn the game of writing English expository prose well enough to achieve some informative or persuasive victories.

But, you protest, writing is not a game; it is hard work. Composition must not be made fun. It must be taken seriously. Of course it must. But whoever said we don't take games seriously? Vince Lombardi? Charlie Finley? Tom Landry? Wittgenstein found it hard to define "game," to restrict games

to particular human activities. He admits that we do not know the boundaries of what it means for something to be a game because "none have been drawn" (PI, 69). But his implication is that no matter how extensive they are, boundaries can indeed be drawn to include only certain human activities under the rubric "game" and exclude certain others. I find that hard to believe. So did Emily Dickinson, as she illustrates with Poem #338 in which she sees her effort to understand the supernatural as a game of hide and seek. Every human activity can be a game. Notice that I did not say that every human activity can be turned into a game, because that would mean that some activities are really not games, but by changing something internal about the activity, we can change non-game into game. From the perspective I am taking today and the one I suggest you take in teaching composition, everything we do is a game.

Writing the 500-word, in-class theme is a language game. It may even be one which we should teach students to play, but we must not forget that it is only one of many language games. Is it, we must ask ourselves, the one best suited to teach students the basic principles of all language games? Or is a journal-game better? But answering those questions would lead me once again through that maze of arguments we have all been through so many times in which we prove over and over again to ourselves (but rarely to others) that our own pedagogical method is superior to all others.

Let me, then, not argue for creative self-expression as the best way to teach students to write or even to get them to want

to write; rather, let me wax philosophical for a moment and ask some Wittgenstein-like questions about work and play, games and non-games. Was I working or playing when I wrote this paper? Am I playing a game in reading it aloud? Or is this far too serious a business to be a game? Are you enjoying what you hear? I'm not on my university's payroll now, so how can I be working? I must be playing.

Clearly, the difference between a game and a non-game is not at all clear. A recent issue of Newsweek used the word "game" at least three times in describing the work of a man who trades in pork bellies on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. But let's turn Robert Frost loose for the last word on those questions of when is it work and when is it play. Remember the two tramps in mudtime who want to chop wood for money instead of fun? The final lines of the poem go like this:

> Only where love and need are one,
> And the work is play for mortal stakes,
> Is the deed ever really done
> For Heaven and the future's sakes.

Such poetic or philosophical meanderings (or game-playing) may be helpful in showing a composition class that writing can be play. Most freshmen will probably not even demand definitions of "language" and of "game," although providing them with such may not be harmful.

Do, however, provide them with an extended analogy between writing and something they think of as a game. Shortly I will

do that very thing with bowling. I hope to have a ball with it.

But first, a few fundamental truths we may forget occasionally about games we play well or even watch well. (By the way, too many composition teachers may be spectators of composition language-games rather than participants.)

Fundamental truth number 1: No game is nearly as much fun when it is first being learned as it is after it has been mastered to some degree. Getting down the basic moves in checkers is not really much fun. Learning to manage a pool cue without ripping up the felt can be a very exasperating experience. Only hard work and not much fun occur during the initial stages of learning to play the language-game of college composition. Freshmen should not be mislead to believe otherwise.

Number 2: A person knows when he has failed or lost in a game. Ultimately students should no more be protected from losing a language-game than they are from losing at solitaire or jacks. One of our most obvious but not easily achieved goals is to get each student to the point of recognizing when he has lost some particular writing struggle between himself and the words. He knows a great deal about bowling when he knows why the ball missed the pocket and what he must do differently the next time. A student of mine recently proved she knows the equivalent about writing by cutting 30 pages out of her own thesis.

Number 3: When a person is first learning to play a game,

he is allowed to make mistakes and to profit from them. The chess instructor does not insist that absolute defeat be declared upon the novice who makes one bad move. Surely the student will be allowed to take back that move so that he may see the ultimate consequences of his mistake. But the game will go on. Such an attitude must be built into all freshman composition courses. Each student must be allowed to play each early match without the penalty of losing the whole game. No permanent penalties, no fixed evaluations, no average-creating numbers should be used until the learning process is so far along that a defeat will not be totally demoralizing. Nobody wants to play when every contest brings instant defeat. Playing against impossible odds is no fun at all. Students must be motivated to keep the game going, to keep trying to learn all the moves. But when they finally can't play the game well enough they must be cut from the roster.

Number 4: All games have rules, including language games. What Wittgenstein has called that "nebulous mass of language" is, of course, not prescribed, not prescribable. The French Academy cannot keep French pure. "Le drug store" is not going out if business because of the academy. Language per se can only be described; it cannot be prescribed. However, particular language games can be and must be prescribed. During my time of employment with the Shell Oil Company I had to spell the word s-u-l-f-u-r because a two-inch thick, loose-leaf notebook directed me to do so. My right to my own spellings

of other words and to some idiosyncratic punctuation practices was taken away from me as long as I wanted to draw a shell of a salary.

That's the way it is in the world of language games. We do our students and ourselves a serious disservice if we try to idealize some other world for them. We might as well try to get them to believe in fairy tales as to preach their right to their own language.

Number 5. Rules are meant to be followed. All pool players (except when they are just playing around) hit the white ball with the smaller end of the stick. Chess players follow the rules about which piece can be moved which direction. Except for a typographical error, I have seen no publication in recent years that did not require its writers and editors to produce t-h-e-r-e and t-h-e-i-r on demand. Surely teachers of composition have as many rights as editors and publishers to demand that their students learn to follow these simple rules or not play the game of writing. Can we really play tennis with someone who keeps trying to strike the ball with the handle portion of the strange instrument? Yes, indeed, the rules of baseball change; of course, the grammatical rules change. As baseball players must know which league has the designated hitter rule, so composition teachers and their students must keep up with changes in the rules, those being established anew by the best of current practices.

Likewise, we must as teachers of composition make an honest and meaningful distinction between language as such and composi-

tion of particular pieces.

We must recognize that within a particular language game as in all other games there are rules, and then there are rules. For example, in a bowling alley you should find no ball weighing more than 16 pounds or measuring more than 27 inches in circumference. Those are rules which must be obeyed if you plan to bowl in a sanctioned league. There are lots of other rules governing your personal conduct and attitudes toward other bowlers in your league. Casual, afternoon bowlers don't pay much attention to these rules, as someone writing personal letters may violate so-called language rules with impunity. But the student who chooses to attend a college or university and to play the language game in composition class limits himself to the rules of the authorities governing that game. Ideally, of course, these authorities will establish the local house-rules intelligently in conjunction with general rules which exist in the overall world of writing what used to be called standard English.

But all games have a second group of rules, which are not rules at all but good practices, suggestions for getting a job done most effectively. In bowling, most instructors will try to get their students to employ a pendulum swing of the arm. Of course, a few years ago Don Carter was a championship bowler with an obviously un-pendulum swing. He badly crooked his throwing elbow during his approach. He was practicing his own style; however, he still bowled with a proper size ball. Of

course, I'm playing a little game here with specialized knowledge of bowling. Any instructor employing an even more extended analogy to motivate his students to see the light will want to play with a game he knows a lot about. These "rules" for better playing exist in each language-game. We call them stylistic rules. Making a firm departmental policy that no student will successfully complete freshman composition without demonstrating the ability to spell a certain list of words with almost perfect consistency is not at all the same thing as making a rule that the first person pronoun is not used in expository prose. Yet students come regularly into my classes doing all sorts of damage to common sense and smooth sentence structure by trying to avoid the pronoun I, because some misguided teacher has laid this rule down as the equivalent of a 16-pound bowling ball. No, this is the equivalent of Don Carter's crooked arm swing. But the same student who has mastered the "no-I" foolishness has been allowed to get through twelve years of schooling without learning to produce certain automatic spellings when the occasion demands. Perhaps we must drop a 16-pound bowling ball on his toes, telling him he cannot write in this league with that faulty equipment.

I know the objections to all I'm saying. I'm letting picky little, unimportant things take precedence over the pursuit of the real problems in composition. But spelling is just one example I have chosen to use. I know that students need to learn to make clear statements of ideas. I also know that

such clarity comes with difficulty, with greater difficulty than getting the mechanics under control.

In fact, I would argue that what we ought to be teaching in all freshman composition courses are matters of clarity, organization, and meaning; we should not be teaching the basics which the students failed to master in the previous twelve years. If they are capable of learning these things, then we must help them to do so on their own, outside the classroom. They need to go to the practice field every day and run their equivalent of windsprints in order to get themselves ready to play the real game when the time comes. Then we can save our real teaching for the important issues of clarity, organization, and meaning. Perhaps we can motivate students to practice and practice again with an appeal to their sporting instincts. Those who arrive in class with the equivalent of 16-pound bowling balls may start using our alleys immediately; those who come with the wrong equipment will have to turn it in for the proper stuff before they will be allowed to start to play our language game. The pendulum swing comes after the ball is weighed.

None of this palaver may be what Wittgenstein meant for me to do with his scattered, undeveloped and, at times, confusing explanations of language games. But he gave me mostly notes and disconnected discourse. My course, then, is clear, as is my conscience. I can use the weight of authority of a famous philosopher in my teaching. Maybe it will even impress a student or two. Perhaps I can motivate a few students into thinking differently about writing, if they can see that it does equate

with other games which they enjoy more and which enjoy a higher ranking in their minds. Perhaps they can even learn something because of the kind of game analogies I have illustrated briefly here. But my main goal with language games in the composition classroom is motivational rather than directly instructive. That's because I'm convinced that the college students with some mental and linguistic agility can learn to play our language game. Our job is primarily to make them want to play it well. But we must begin again to believe in our own game and to enforce the rules. Let's face it, being the lovable old coach may not be enough; we may have to become the hated referees again.

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